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STITCHES IN TIME

AN EXHIBITION
OF EMBROIDERIES AND
NEEDLEWORK TECHNIQUES

January 28th through April 12th

1947

THE COOPER UNION MUSEUM
FOR THE ARTS OF DECORATION

COOPER SQUARE, NEW YORK

STITCHES IN TIME

Notes on the Art of Embroidery

EMBROIDERY is one of the arts of decoration. And embroidery, like carving, printing, enamelling or any other technique, has its own distinctive possibilities and characteristics. The pieces assembled in this exhibition, dating from the sixth century to this season of 1946-1947, have been brought together to show the essential qualities of embroidery, to enrich the artistic experience of visitors by examples that are of beautiful design and workmanship, and to offer to the creative talent of today suggestions which might otherwise be overlooked.

The definition of embroidery establishes two facts: first, that it is accomplished by means of a thread, generally carried in a needle (but the term thread may be broadly interpreted, as will be seen) and secondly, that the work is done on a finished foundation. This distinguishes embroidery from brocading, with which it is sometimes confused, because brocading is part of the process of weaving.

The foundation fabrics and threads most used by embroiderers are, and always have been, of silk, wool, cotton or linen, with gold and silver, pearls or semi-precious stones for enrichment. The Museum displays, as part of its permanent exhibit, an altar frontal from sixteenth-century Spain, of red velvet embroidered in colored silk, threads of gold and small garnets. But leather, birch-bark, or straw-work may receive embroidery, and human hair, thongs of leather or of wood fibre, raffia, or porcupine quills may be used as thread. And beads, beetle wings, shells, and other substances may be sewed on to the fabric and become part of the embroidery. It is interesting to note that basketry of the coiled type is often sewed with buttonhole, chain and other stitches.

One of the characteristics of embroidery is that it permits of more freedom of design than do weaving or printing (other important forms of textile decoration), for the design need not come in repeats, even when based on counted threads. Other characteristics are that the embroidery thread, in forming the stitches, provides a new texture on the ground weave and that, in so doing, it takes away from the flatness of the cloth. The relief may be very slight, as when a fine silk thread is used, or it may be quite high, as in stumpwork.

Then there are endless possibilities for artistic selections in the relationship between the embroidery thread and the ground cloth. They may be of contrasting, or the same, color; of contrasting, or the same, material (some people think that silk on linen is the most attractive, others hold for wool on cotton, and others for silk on silk); or they may be of contrasting, or the same, quality (the linen on linen of the cottage or the rich gold on silk of the Church or Court).

The skill of the embroiderer is shown in the needlework. Stitches must be carefully made and exactly placed, each one similar to the others in every detail and a uniform tension of thread kept throughout. One stitch made more loosely than the others will spoil the effect of that part of the work. In fact, carelessness is no more to be tolerated here than in the workshop of the jeweler, or any other craftsman.

When embroidery was an accepted means of expression, men and women both, of high and low estate, were owners of embroidery and often needleworkers themselves — the men specializing, it is said, in gold work. By needles and thread, no less than by chisels and hammers, or by brushes and paints, were ideas given form.

It is possible to increase one's knowledge of the lives, activities and even the thoughts of the people of preceding centuries by a study of needlework because it was executed in the designs and stitches that appealed at the time of its making. Looking back over history, it is seen that there are many periods in which embroidery has played a prominent part. Tombs in Egypt and excavation in pre-Christian sites in the Crimea

and in Asia have yielded needle-decorated fabrics among other treasures. It has been said that the earliest piece of embroidery to be definitely dated is the fragment of a garment taken from the tomb of Thotmose IV. It is tapestry with embroidery in twined stitch and dates from the sixteenth century B.C. In this exhibition are pieces from the Coptic period worked in counted running stitches (1).*

Yet comparatively few pieces remain that antedate the Arabic period. A little group of worn, but precious, fragments of Egypto-Arabic work, on permanent display in the Museum, show that buttonhole, matting, square, darning, double running, satin, chain, cross and split stitches — all in use today — were used then. In the following centuries, as the Islamic Empire spread across Africa and into Spain, during the Middle Ages, and when the Renaissance brought renewed artistic activity to Europe, even down to modern times, quantities of embroideries were made and important examples survive. Each country and each stratum of society has expressed itself with its own kind of embroidery, whether it was in the deeply religious life of mediaeval England, under the Moorish conquest of Spain, at the luxury-loving court of the eighteenth century in France, or in the nineteenth-century Balkans where designs and techniques show the influence of the Turkish invasion on Eastern Europe.

The use of any of the decorative arts is affected by economic and social conditions and embroidery is no exception to this rule. Under eighteenth-century fashions, chairs might be covered entirely with crewel-work or canvas embroidery. Today, chair seats are sometimes done in petit point, or a cushion will have a small square of canvas work in the center. In general, hand-embroidery is now considered too expensive for upholstery, though its superior durability should commend it for this purpose.

Clothing is not heavily hand-embroidered like the garments made by the European peasants of the last century, when time was plentiful and woven materials scarce; but in the ready-made clothing of today, when materials are normally plentiful and beautiful and free time is scarce,

* Numbers set in parentheses refer to numbered examples in the exhibition.

color and texture-decoration are achieved by mechanical means which infrequently include embroidery of the traditional sort.

A comparison of the amount and placing of embroidery on costume is an interesting and enlightening study. Consider the following examples: a magnificent dress of the mid-eighteenth century with handsome embroidery on the overskirt, such as that shown in the design (2); a more simple dress with small embroidered motifs scattered over the fabric in a style that recalls the brocaded patterns of the time; the dresses of the early nineteenth century, of sheer material with skirts that were meant to hang straight and were, therefore, weighted down with embroidery, puffing, or other ornament placed at the hem (3); peasant costume with a great deal of needlework placed where it would show to best advantage; and lastly, the garments of today with embroidery used to emphasize the parts of the dress where interest centers (4).

There have always been several ways of achieving desired effects in embroidery and it is of interest to see the methods that are most in use in these practical days when the machine plays such an important part in needlework decoration. Two favored ways of producing areas of color were by satin stitch (5), and by the applying of one piece of fabric on another (6); today the appliqué method is the one most frequently used. Texture-interest, once achieved by an especially selected stitch, or by combining stitches of several types (7), is now supplied by sewed-on braids; and a cord, couched on, can form the thickened line that embroiderers once worked in raised stitches (8). The list might be continued with openwork embroidery, once formed by drawing the fabric threads apart with a well-controlled embroidery thread (9), but now often formed by penetration of a large needle. Beads and spangles are as popular as ever. But, whereas examples of other centuries show beads sewed on by running stitches, beads are today attached by the chain stitch worked with a hook from the wrong side. Machines, operated by skillful hands, do quilting and chain stitch. And because of the excellent work done by clever operators, tucking, gathering and forms of fabric manipu-

lation are acquiring a decorative value which gives them a place similar to embroidery, and has even led to their being called embroidery.

Costume, at present, shows little hand-embroidery of the type used in bygone centuries to ornament the clothing of men, women and children, although details of needlework and well-executed finishings are marks of high-priced dressmaker's work. Our age has developed a new type of dress-embroidery and that it might have its deserved place in this exhibition, examples have been borrowed from several New York firms.

The differences in traditional and modern embroidery techniques have been pointed out. But in design there are similarities. Two pieces in the exhibition (10 and 11) are, in their patterns and use of color, reminiscent of beautiful work of the past. The first, a design carried out in bugle beads in soft colors, calls to mind old silk embroidery in satin stitch, the long beads being today's interpretation of the long stitch and the shading being similar. The second, also a flower pattern, is in small spangles which give much the effect of very fine cross-stitch.

Those who work by mechanical means are finding that the rigid requirements of the machine and the high costs of production may be surmounted so that something with the charm and variety of old embroidery may be produced which is still in accord with the modern point of view.

Hand-embroiderers, and there are many today doing excellent work, have discovered that theirs is no more difficult, no more time- or patience-consuming than any of the other arts and that there is definite pleasure in making designs for embroidery, in carrying out the designs in stitches on fabric — pleasure, too, in the handling of fine materials and embroidery threads. Sewing is a simple, practical way of ornamenting many objects of everyday use. The tools and materials are easily obtainable and suitable for today's small homes. The work can be taken up and put down as other matters claim one's attention since no elaborate equipment, such as is needed for some of the other crafts, is required.

Both the hand and the mechanical embroiderers, however, will find

amply demonstrated by the examples here displayed the essential requirements of this art of decoration. There is valuable suggestion for alert minds in a study of the best work of any period, and the remarks given in the following section of this leaflet will perhaps help in presenting those qualities that have made embroidery an important art in the past.

Arrangement of the Exhibition

As the exhibition has been arranged there are two divisions; one presenting embroidery as an art and explaining the technique, and the other showing fine examples which have been grouped according to century and country of origin.

In the technique section are shown the tools with which the embroiderer works. Here are thimbles, scissors, winders for reeling silk thread, needle cases and pincushions; but, above all, it is the needle which holds the place of central importance. With it, embroidery, which is essentially the decoration of material by a thread, is best accomplished. The needle is a thoroughly functional tool, with its eye which carries the thread into the fabric, its sharp point to pierce the fabric and its smooth shaft growing larger so gradually that it enlarges the hole in the cloth by such gentle pressure that the threads spring back nearly into place after its passage. It is a tool perfectly adapted to its use and streamlined, too, for all that it is centuries old. Hand-made, and an object of great value in the Middle Ages, the needle was honored with a place in theological discussions by the learned doctors who asked, "How many angels can dance on the point of a needle?"

Designs may be of many different kinds; geometric, floral, animal life, or of such unusual forms as angels, mermaids or centaurs (12).

The artist must choose the design with care. It must in itself be a good one and the principles which apply to all designing must be remembered. There must be good line, proportion and color, right scale, the best placing and spacing of ornament with symmetry or asymmetry, crowding of detail, or spare use of decoration, as desired. Besides, the design must

be suitable to the object being ornamented. If the embroidery is to be used for decoration (not as an end in itself, as in the embroidered picture), the relationship between the ornament and the object to be ornamented must be borne in mind, and the design must be suitable to the object being ornamented. When this is forgotten and the technique is indulged in simply because it is a pleasant pastime, it no longer serves the true purpose of a decorative art. In the exhibition there are, besides some fragments, a certain number of whole pieces, so that the relation between ornament and object may be seen.

Another important selection to be made is that of the stitches to be used in translating the design into embroidery. Because this is so very important, we have prepared large-scale samplers to demonstrate several stitches, their variations and the different effects to be obtained by using silk or wool, or a heavy or a light thread. It is an interesting fact that most of the stitches have been used in many parts of the world and that the popularity of individual stitches, as of many things, has risen and fallen at different periods. Or it might better be said, certain stitches were used at certain times because they expressed that period better than any other stitches would have done. For instance, split stitch, well adapted for depicting faces, and used so generally in mediaeval church embroidery, is found much less often in later work. And chain stitch, though known for a long time, comes into more widespread use in the floral designs of the eighteenth century. Samplers have been made for buttonhole, chain, satin, cross, running and twining stitches, and with each sampler is a short history of the stitch. This idea is more fully developed in the twenty-eight charts which are a part of the Museum's permanent embroidery collection.

In this exhibition an effort has been made to bring together some of the best examples in the Museum collection with others of fine quality, lent for the occasion by generous friends, in order to provide the visitor the means of knowing the extent and excellence of the art of embroidery. The outstanding qualities of the embroideries have been emphasized by

labels. The early pieces from Coptic Egypt and Peru are followed by two cases of sixteenth-century work from Italy and Spain, then seventeenth-century examples from Spain, England and Italy, three cases of eighteenth-century material and one of oriental embroidery, and nineteenth-century work, including peasant productions, with modern pieces in the alcoves. As further indication of the Museum's resources in the field of embroidery, two table cases are installed with some of the original designs of earlier periods. A selection of books has been temporarily withdrawn from the Library to form part of the exhibition; and for permanent reference, a bibliography is printed in the following pages.

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Jourdon, 1918. 143 p., illus., plates. 45
cm. (Arts Marocains.)
- SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM, LONDON. . . .
A descriptive catalogue of a collection of
tapestry-woven and embroidered Egyptian
textiles in the South Kensington Museum.
London, printed by Eyre and Spottiswoode
for H. M. Stationery Off., 1887. xvii, 70 p.
23 cm.
- STAPLEY, MILDRED. Popular weaving and
embroidery in Spain. . . . New York, Wil-
liam Helburn [c.1924]. 60 p., front., pl.
(part col.). 25½ cm.
- STASSOFF, W. L'ornement national russe,
première livraison - broderies, tissus, den-
telles. . . . 1872. 45 p., 75 col. plates. 37
cm.
- TRONDHEIM. NORDENFJELDSKE KUNSTINDUS-
TRI MUSEUM. Norwegische bauerstickere-
in. . . . Leipzig, K. W. Hiersemann, 1926.
50 plates. 43 cm.

- UNDI, MÁRIA. Hungarian fancy needlework and weaving; the history of Hungarian decorative embroideries . . . Budapest, the author, n.d. 87 p., illus., plates (part col.). 30 cm.
- UNION CENTRALE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, PARIS. Dessins de broderies, fin du XVIII^e siècle & 1^{er} empire . . . Paris, A. Calavas [193-?]. 48 plates. 41 cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. Brief guide to the Chinese embroideries. London, H. M. Stationery Off., 1931. 12 p., 8 plates. 18½ cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. Brief guide to the Persian embroideries. London, published under the authority of the Board of education, 1937. 19 p., front., plates. 18 cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. Catalogue of Algerian embroideries. London, H. M. Stationery Off., 1915. 14 p., front., plates. 24 cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. Catalogue of English ecclesiastical embroideries of the XIII to XVI centuries. London, pub. under the authority of the Board of education, 1930. viii, 47 p., front., plates. 24½ cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. A picture book of English embroideries. Parts 1-3. London, published under the authority of the Board of education, 1933-34. 3 v., plates. 19 cm.
- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON. A picture book of flowers in English embroidery. London, published under the authority of the Board of education [c.1932]. 20 plates. 19 cm.
- WHEELER, MRS. CANDACE (THURBER). The development of embroidery in America. . . New York and London, Harper & brothers, 1921. ix, 151 p., front., plates (part col.) 24½ cm.
- ZULUETA, FRANCIS DE. Embroideries by Mary Stuart & Elizabeth Talbot at Ox-burgh Hall, Norfolk . . . Oxford, Oxford university press, 1923. 16 p., plates. 33 cm.
- PATTERNS AND DESIGNS**
- ANDROUET DU CERCEAU, PAUL. [Décoration par P. A. du Cerceau et D. Marot. Paris, Guérinet, n.d.] 26 plates. 29 cm.
- ANWEISUNG zum sticken und illuminiren mit ausgemalten und schwarzen zeichnungen von bouquets . . . ein geschenk für meine freundinnen. Halle, Dreyzig, n.d. 24 p., 6 plates. 11½ x 21 cm.
- ANTICO lavoro fiorentino (Punto d'Ungheria). Firenze, Casini, Ortolani & co., c.1925. 10 col. plates. 24½ cm.
- BATTISTELLI, CHIARA CERNETTI. Guida pratica per l'insegnamento del punto di Assisi . . . Milano, Soc. editrice Unitas [c.1925]. 44 plates. 42½ cm.
- CIOTTI, GIOVANNI BATTISTA. Vorlagen für nadelarbeiten von G. B. Ciotti, 1591. Berlin, Ernest Wasmuth, 1891. plates. 17½ x 22 cm.
- COCHERIS, HIPPOLYTE. Patrons de broderie et de lingerie du XVI^e siècle . . . Paris, Librairie de l'Echo de la Sorbonne, 1872. 19 p., 100 plates. 20 cm.
- [DESIGNS] [n.p., 1666?] plates. 16½ cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Album de broderies au point de croix. Mulhouse-Belfort-Paris, Dollfus-Mieg, n.d. 3v., plates. 40 cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Alphabete für die stickerin . . . Dornach (Elsass), Verlag von Th. de Dillmont, [19-?]. 92 plates. 13½ x 19½ cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Alphabets et monogrammes . . . [Mulhouse (Alsace), Dollfus-Mieg, 189-?]. vii p., 60 plates. 23 x 29 cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. La broderie au passé . . . Dornach (Alsace), Th. de Dillmont [189-?] 6 p., 20 plates. 30½ cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Colbert embroidery . . . Mulhouse (France), [Dollfus-Mieg, n.d.] 13 col. plates. 20 x 29 cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Cross stitch, new designs. (IVth ser.). Mulhouse (France), Th. de Dillmont, [19-?]. plates. 19½ x 29 cm.
- DILLMONT, THÉRÈSE DE. Motifs for embroideries (IIIrd ser.). Mulhouse (France), [Dollfus-Mieg, n.d.] 20 col. plates. 19½ x 29 cm.
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- FIORI di ricami nvovamente posti in Ivce. Ne i quali sono vari, et diversi disegni di lavori . . . In Siena, Appresso Mattei Florimi, MDCIII. plates. 14 x 19 cm.
- FORESTO, ISEPPPO. Musterbuch Venetianischer nadelarbeiten. 1558. Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1891. plates. 23 cm.
- FRANCESCHI, DOMENICO DE'. Serena, opera nova di recami . . . In Venetia, Appresso Domenico de' Franceschi . . . MDLXIII. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1879]. un p. plates. 18 x 28 cm.
- GUICHARD, EDOUARD. Les petits alphabets du brodeur; compositions originales . . . Paris, n.d. 39 plates. 31 x 46½ cm.
- HOFFMANN, WILHELM. Wilhelm Hoffmann's spitzen-musterbuch. . . Wien, Verlag des K. K. Oesterr. museums, 1876. 18 plates. 24½ x 36 cm.

- HOFFMANN, WILHELM. Wilhelm Hoffmann's neues modelbuch, 1604. Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1891. 17 plates. 23 x 35 cm.
- LES LANGES du Dauphin de France: points coupés. [n.p., 1667?]. 110 plates. 30 cm. (Title page missing, binder's title.)
- LESSING, JULIUS. Muster altd deutscher leinenstickerei . . . Berlin, F. Lipperheide, 1882.
- LIPPERHEIDE, FRIEDA. Muster altitalienischer leinenstickerei . . . Berlin, F. Lipperheide, 1881-83. 2 v., illus., plates. 30 cm.
- DIE MODELWELT. Muster altd deutscher leinenstickerei. Dritte sammlung . . . Berlin, F. Lipperheide, 1880. 32 p., 25 plates. 30 cm.
- NEU-HERVORKOMMENDES weber kunst und bild buch . . . Culmbach, in verlegung Nathaniel Lumschers, 1720. plates. 18 x 21 1/2 cm.
- NOUVEAU MANUEL complet de la broderie atlas. Paris, Librairie Encyclopedique de Roret, n.d. 40 plates. 16 x 23 cm.
- OSTAUS, GIOVANNI. La vera perfettione del disegno; di varie sorti di ricami . . . Venice, Francesco di Franceschi, 1591. 80 plates on 40 l. 1 1/2 x 22 cm. [Livres à dentelles & dessins d'ornement reproduits et publiés par Amand-Durand . . . 1883.]
- OSTAUS, GIOVANNI. La vera perfezione del disegne per punti e recami; riproduzione della edizione di Venezia del 1561 . . . Bergamo, Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1909. 8 p., 81 plates. 16 1/2 x 23 cm.
- PAGAN, MATTHIO. L'honesto essemplio del virtuoso desiderio che hanno le donne di nobil ingegno . . . In Venetia per Matthio Pagan . . . MDL. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1878]. plates. 26 cm.
- PAGANINO, ALLESANDRO. Libro de rechami . . . 1527. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1878]. 4 v., plates. 26 cm.
- PARASOLE, ISABETTA CATANEA. Musterbuch für stickereien und spitzen . . . 1616. Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1891. plates. 23 x 35 cm.
- PARASOLE, ISABETTA CATANEA. Pretiosa gemma delle virtuose donne . . . Venetia, Ad instantia Lucchino Cargano, MDC. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1879]. plates. 21 1/2 x 30 cm.
- PARASOLE, ISABETTA CATANEA. Teatro delle nobili et virtuose donne. In Roma, 1616. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1891]. plates. 21 1/2 x 30 cm.
- PELLEGRIN, FRANCISQUE. La fleur de la science de pourtraicture patrons de broderie, facon arabe et ytalique . . . 1530. Paris, Jean Schmidt, 1908. 8 p., 62 l., illus. 31 cm.
- QUENTEL, PETER. Musterbuch für ornamente und stickmuster . . . (1527-1529). Leipzig, E. Schloemp, [18-?]. 90 plates. 26 cm.
- SERA, DOMENICO DA. Le livre de lingerie . . . Paris, Hierosme de Marnef & la veuve de Guillaume Cavellat, 1584. 4 p., 50 plates. 36 cm. [Livres à dentelles reproduits et publiés par Amand-Durand . . . 1897.]
- SILLJAN, ELSIE H. The twentieth century pattern book for Norwegian lace and embroidery. Kristiania, Norway, Grondahl & son, 1908. 18 p., illus. 24 cm.
- TOILETTEN - GESCHENK: ein jahrbuch für damen. Leipzig, Georg Voss, 1805-1807. 3 v., col. plates. 20 x 24 cm.
- VAN MEERTEN, A. B. Penelope of Maandwerk aan het vrouwelijk geslacht toegewijd . . . Amsterdam, G. J. A. Beijerinck, 1821-1826. 4 vol., col. plates. 23 cm.
- VANNINI, L. Lavoro assisiano . . . n.p., n.d. 2 v. in 1. col. plates. 23 x 33 cm.
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- VECELLIO, CESARE. Corona delle nobili, et virtuose donne . . . Venetia, Cesare Vecellio, 1592. 2 v., plates. 13 x 18 cm.
- VECELLIO, CESARE. Corona delle nobili, et virtuose donne . . . Venetia, Cesare Vecellio, 1592-1608. 4 v. in 1. plates. 13 x 18 cm.
- VECELLIO, CESARE. Corona delle nobili, et virtuose donne, libro primo . . . Venetia, Cesare Vecellio, 1600. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1879]. plates. 18 x 27 1/2 cm.
- VECELLIO, CESARE. Corona delle nobili, et virtuose donne, libro quinto . . . Venetia, Cesare Vecellio, 1596. [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1891]. 10 plates. 30 cm.
- VECELLIO, CESARE. Die krone der kunstfertigen frauen . . . 1691. Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1891. 4 parts in 1. plates. 14 x 19 cm.
- VINCIOLO, FEDERICO. I singolari e nuovi disegni per lavori di biancheria. Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'art grafiche, 1909. 128 p., illus. 22 cm.
- WOLF & DUPEYRON. Le point de croix ancien et moderne . . . Paris, Wolf & Dupeyron, n.d. plates. 31 x 42 cm.
- ZOPPINO. Esemplario di lavori doue le tenere fasciulle et altre donne nobile potranno facilmente imparare il modo et ordine di laorare . . . [Venezia, F. Ongania, 1878]. 47 plates. 28 cm.

RICHARD E. MORSE

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